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*Oedipus The King* and the Inescapable Net of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

While some argue that Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is a prime example of fate in action, there is plenty of evidence that points away from the idea that fate is inescapable. There are many instances in the play when the characters' decisions and actions have a clear impact on the outcome of their situation. W.I Thomas, the dean of American sociologists, set forth a theorem basic to the social sciences: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'"(Merton 193). This points towards the reactions of the characters to hearing the prophecies. "The ... theorem provides an unceasing reminder that men respond not only to the objective features of a situation, but also, and at times primarily, to the meaning the situation has for them. And once they have assigned some meaning to the situation, their consequent behavior and some of the consequences of that behavior are determined by the ascribed meaning."(Merton 194) The 'inescapable net of destiny' in *Oedipus the King* is not a mystical force of fate, but the psychological nuances of the characters' decisions that cause the prophecies they receive to become self-fulfilling. There are multiple instances where the tragic outcome could have more than likely been avoided, but by "assigning meaning to the situation", the actions taken by the characters actually caused the end results.

One of the most famous definitions of self-fulfilling prophecy is that it "is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a

reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning" (Merton 195). To put it into different words, "What is conceived to be real also tends to become real. The act of thinking, postulating, conceiving, imagining, believing tends to shape that which is thought about, postulated, conceived, imagined or believed. The act of forming a hypothesis or building a model cannot, in such a situation, be indifferent to the possible consequences of the hypothesis or model turning into a reality just because somebody thought of postulating a hypothesis or building the model."(Krishna 1107)

By the conclusion of the play and the reveal of Oedipus' true heritage, this concept becomes apparent. By assuming that the prediction set by the oracle was true, Laius chose to take immediate action. "When the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi told Laius that he would die at the hands of his only son, the King of Thebes could but choose between two alternatives. Laius could offer no resistance; he could attempt to live and to rule is at this horrible death did not await him, as if the nature of such a death did not matter. Or he could attempt somehow to evade this prophecy." (Weil 337) And attempt to evade the prophecy he did- as Jocasta says of their son, "it was but three days old, When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned Together, gave it to be cast away"(Sophocles 43). By removing the baby from his parents, Laius sets in motion the key factor that seems to make the prophecy possible: the occlusion of Oedipus' past from himself.

Once Oedipus learns of the prophecy, we see a desperate attempt to act from him as well: "On almost identical terms, the Oracle tells Oedipus"(Weil 337) "that [he] should mate with [his] own mother, and shed with [his] own hands the blood of [his] own sire." (Sophocles 57-58) "The Oracle leaves Oedipus the same choice and the same limitation it earlier had given to Laius, and the decision that Oedipus makes is the same"(Weil 337). By becoming aware of this prophecy, Oedipus takes the action that sets the prophecy into direct motion- he leaves the people he knows

to be his parents and ends up accomplishing the exact thing he set out to avoid. "Since the oracle had threatened parricide and incest, it was logical that the hero should resolve to keep his parents out of sight. But logic, in this case, proved worse than useless, and did so for reasons that go beyond the simple fact that he was avoiding the wrong people.... while the hero himself receives no connection between the two events juxtaposed in his narrative (the oracle and the fatal meeting at the crossroads), the audience sees the second event was the consequence of the first, and thus that invisible lines of force extend between them" (Kane 196). The irony in this situation lies in the fact that, had Oedipus known the truth of his parentage or stayed with the people he believed to be his parents, the outcome could have easily been avoided. "It was Oedipus himself who, by taking the road to Thebes and killing the 'stranger', furnished the raw material out of which providence fashioned a parricide" (Kane 196).

Oedipus not only contributes to his fate with his direct actions, but with his attitudes- "the circumstance which has the greatest effect on his destiny is not simply that he is ignorant of the facts but that, like the people whom Socrates met on the streets, he often acts as if he knew what he does not"(Kane 189-190). One of the key components of Oedipus's character is that he jumps quickly to conclusions and holds strong beliefs, which "have consequences not because they are false, but because they are beliefs. And hence the social reality that we have is the result of an unending chain of beliefs, both true and false. Therefore, the question whether my belief is true or false becomes irrelevant to its role as a determining factor in social reality."(Krishna 1106) These beliefs cause actions, which if perhaps were thought about beforehand, would have happened differently. As Kane argues, "The primary emphasis falls, not on the enormity of Oedipus' misdeeds, but on his failure to see them"(Kane 192). This can be seen by Tiresias'

observations on Oedipus' "—thou hast eyes, Yet see'st not in what misery thou art fallen"  
(Sophocles 25).

“The world of men constituted as it is of beings who are conscious, both of themselves and others, is liable to be affected and influenced by factors other than the purely physical ones. It can become aware of what thought or postulated about it, and this very awareness can affect or influence it in a certain direction. A conscious being, just because it is conscious, cannot remain an effective or indifferent by its awareness of what is conceived or thought about it. The difference, therefore, between the world of nature and the world of social reality... is rooted in the absence or presence of the capacity for self-consciousness on the part of that which is the object of study"(Krishna 1104). *Oedipus the King* is not a play about natural forces- it is a play about people and the consequences of their decisions and actions. As Weil says, "In the plot of the present action, the hero progresses from being the mere plaything of forces of predestination to become the controller of significant choices that remain possible to him"(Weil 341). "Public definitions of a situation (prophecies or predictions) become an integral part of the situation and that affect subsequent developments. ...The prophecy... led to its own fulfillment." (Merton 195)

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